



# BLACK TERROR

BY  
RICHARD WESLEY



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BLACK TERROR  
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The New York production of BLACK TERROR opened at the Public Theater in the fall of 1971. The production was directed by Nathan George; the set design was by Marjorie Kellogg, and the lighting design was by Buddy Butler. The cast was as follows:

ANTAR .....	Paul Benjamin
AHMED .....	Kirk Young
KEUSI .....	Gylan Kain
M'BALIA .....	Susan Batson
GERONIMO .....	Don Blakely
RADCLIFFE .....	Earl Sydnor
DANCER .....	Dolores Vanison
PRIESTESS .....	Freda Vanderpool
BROTHERS AND SISTERS INVOLVED	
IN THE STRUGGLE .....	Preston Bradley, Niger Akoni, James Buckley, Sylvia Soares
MUSICIANS .....	Babafemi Akinlana, Ralph Dorsey, Ladji Camara

## Notes on *Black Terror*

I began thinking about writing a play about the “revolutionary phase” of the post-Civil Rights struggle after a series of national incidents made me question the efficacy of armed resistance as a means of protest and an engine of change.

In 1966, the Spanish film director Gillo Pontecorvo directed a landmark film entitled *The Battle of Algiers*. The film takes place during the 1950s and is set in the Kasbah, the segregated Arab quarter of Algiers, the capital of French-occupied Algeria. Mr. Pontecorvo’s picture presented a fictionalized account of the first insurrection against French colonial rule and showed how, though ultimately unsuccessful, that insurrection led directly to the struggle for Algerian independence. The French were overwhelmed by the end of the decade, and this led to a newly independent Algeria in the early ’60s. Shot in a semi-documentary style, in grainy black and white, the film had a major influence on young liberation militants the world over, not the least in the United States, where youthful black men and women compared life in the Kasbah with life in the inner cities of their own country. Ultimately, many young people began to wonder if the “lessons” of *The Battle of Algiers* could not be applied to the armed struggle at home. Such conversations were held among young people in private parties, across tables in smoky cafés, on street corners, and even in college classrooms on campuses across the United States. And not just black kids, but white and Latino and Native American as well—everywhere the film was shown, oppressed and suppressed people were sure to begin drawing parallels.

However, my own response to the film, while very much appreciating its sentiments, was muted because of one particular memory. Not too long before seeing Pontecorvo’s film, I was called into the Homicide Division of the Newark Police Department to answer questions. It turned out that a friend I had worked with in a program sponsored by HARYOU-ACT, an anti-poverty agency based in Harlem, had been found shot to death in a rooming house. My name was among his belongings, and the police were seeking out everyone who knew him to determine any leads.

As I sat there speaking to a detective, my eye couldn’t help but

take in my surroundings. What stood out for me were the street maps on the walls and their level of detail: alleys, dead ends, the locations of police boxes—they were all there. The memory of those maps came back to me as I noticed the way the French commander depicted in *Battle of Algiers* used similar maps to track down and defeat the Algerian militants. It would also come back to me two years later, as I read about the police raid on the Black Panther Party headquarters in Los Angeles.

Fred Hampton was a young, charismatic leader of the Chicago branch of the Black Panther Party. He was twenty-one years old, handsome, athletic, intelligent, and erudite. If ever there was an heir apparent to Huey Newton, the party's by-then-imprisoned national leader, it was Fred Hampton—even more so than the party's internationally known minister of defense, Eldridge Cleaver. Hampton was assassinated in his bed by members of the Chicago and Illinois police. The world would later learn that he had been betrayed by an informant who was in the employ of the FBI, and that the operation was just one more offshoot of their COINTELPRO (or counterintelligence program), designed to delay, disrupt, and ultimately destroy any and all “militant” movements or operations within the African-American community.

A group of young white sympathizers of the then-nascent Weather Underground were sharing an apartment in a Greenwich Village brownstone in New York City. They had become radicalized by what they saw happening to the Black Panther Party, the slow but steady dismantling of the war on poverty by the Nixon Administration, efforts by the CIA to undermine or destroy leftist liberation movements across the Third World, and, foremost, by their deeply felt opposition to the United States' expansion of the war in Vietnam. These young people were secretly making bombs in their apartment when, inexplicably, one of the bombs blew up. It destroyed virtually the entire building and killed all of the young people save one, Bernardine Dohrn, who was seen bloodied, naked, and in shock, fleeing the rubble. She would remain on the FBI's Most Wanted list for nearly thirty years before voluntarily turning herself in during the Clinton administration.

Out on the West Coast, political tensions had arisen between the Black Panther Party—Marxist-influenced and politically aligned

with a loose and racially mixed amalgam of domestic and foreign leftist political movements—and US, a Black Nationalist organization that eschewed such political alliances in favor of total commitment to, and concentration within, the African-American community. Those political differences—coupled with an ever-growing dependence on guns as a means of both defense and of imposing the political will of members of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party and the Los Angeles chapter of US—ultimately led to violent confrontations between members of these organizations, escalating to such intensity that the leadership on both sides attempted to arrange a meeting to effect a truce and dial down the temperature. One such meeting was supposed to occur in a cafeteria on the campus of UCLA. Instead, gunfire erupted and two Panthers were killed. A pall was cast over the entire Black Liberation movement and remained for years to come; some might say it never lifted.

The LAPD attempted a raid on the Los Angeles headquarters of the Black Panther Party during the summer of 1970. A sixteen-square-block area around the building was cordoned off; residents were ordered to remain in their homes and off the streets. The police used an armored car (similar to the one featured in the original *Die Hard* movie), and all of the officers were armed with AR-15s, the civilian version of the M-15s U.S. troops were using in the bush and marshes of Vietnam. It turned out, however, that the Panthers had fortified their headquarters, and they resisted the superior firepower of the police for a number of hours before surrendering when their ammo ran out. There were fewer than ten Panthers inside, some of them young women. When I heard the news, I thought again about those street maps in the Newark Police Headquarters building.

And then Huey Newton, in an article in the Black Panther Party newspaper, introduced and advocated the idea of “the urban kamikaze”—revolutionary guerrillas, on suicide missions, prepared to sacrifice all for the movement. It was a notion that was quickly abandoned, but for me it was a clear declaration that the armed faction of the Black Liberation movement had finally run out of ideas.

I was determined to say something. I decided, finally, to put “the Revolution” onstage, to write a play that would take place “in the very near future, given the nature of American society.” I wanted

a play in which all of the ideas about armed struggle, and the unquestioning fealty to nationalist as well as leftist ideals, would be presented not as possibilities but as fact; my characters would exemplify and live out these ideals before our eyes, and they would execute the armed struggle.

The stage would serve as a laboratory, allowing the audience to determine, through the dramatic presentation of ideas in action, whether the revolution that was being waged in their name needed to be changed, improved, executed exactly as it was, or abandoned.

I began work on the play almost immediately after the raid on the Los Angeles Black Panther Party headquarters. I collected newspaper articles and photographs of the raid and studied them daily. Ed Bullins, one of the finest playwrights in the country at the time, loaned me a book he'd bought on a trip to London: *Zero*, about the Nihilist movement in nineteenth-century Europe. I learned how the Czar of Russia had ordered his secret police to wage a counterintelligence operation that not only infiltrated the various Nihilist cells in Russia, but also fomented dissent, ran smear campaigns against the leadership, took over cells and ran them, and functioned as informants. The resemblance to the FBI's COINTELPRO was unmistakable.

I attended symposia on art and politics in Harlem, Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Newark, New Jersey, and every day, every spare minute I had, I was writing—a sentence here, a scene there—all by hand, on a yellow legal pad that I carried in a military map bag slung over my shoulder. I wrote at home, on the bus to visit my then-girlfriend, on the subway to work, at parties, and backstage at the New Lafayette Theatre where I was managing editor of *Black Theatre Magazine*, until finally, some six months after I began, the play was completed. I settled on the title *Black Terror* because I knew it was provocative and people would come to see it. I intended to write a play that could be performed in gymnasiums, on portable stages in open parks, in the quadrangles of housing developments—plays for the people, where the largest number of people were most likely to be. I also knew that designing a play that could be performed in the community, particularly a play that carried the message this one did, meant that the primary audience for *Terror* would be those who would most suffer the consequences of an armed struggle in

the streets of America.

*Terror's* first public exposure was a reading in the Black Theatre Workshop, headed by Ed Bullins. Later, a former Howard University classmate, Rafique Bey, presented *Terror* as his thesis play. The FBI, which had already been on campus to observe student activism protesting the Vietnam War and support of Black Nationalist leaders on campus, attended in large numbers. At the same time, Ed Bullins showed the play to producer Joseph Papp, artistic director of the New York Shakespeare Festival/Public Theater. Papp—himself an old-school activist from the '30s and '40s—immediately took a liking to *Black Terror*, reached out to me, and made a commitment to producing the play in his theater, where it opened in October 1971.

—R. W.



## **BROTHERS AND SISTERS INVOLVED IN THE STRUGGLE**

ANTAR—Late twenties or early thirties. College education. Strong, well-muscled, and stern. Relatively quiet. Speaks in soft tones. Not given to boisterousness.

AHMED—Somewhat younger. Full of fire. Could be a good leader if he would calm down and check things out.

KEUSI—Full name, Keusi Kifo (“Black Death”). He is in his mid-to late twenties and is a war vet. He is always a man who knows whereof he speaks.

M’BALIA—Named for M’Balía Camara, a Black woman who is known in Africa as a woman whose death was one of the sparks of the Guinean drive for independence from France. The sister is strong, determined, and a devoted revolutionary. She is not unfeminine, but displays her womanness only when she feels it suits her.

GERONIMO—A fiery revolutionary. Leader of the local chapter of the American Liberation Front. Quick-tempered; a flair for the dramatic. At times he seems almost unreal.

CHAUNCEY RADCLIFFE—Middle-aged. A moderate Black man who thinks he is doing the right thing.

OTHERS—Three brothers, a sister, other members of the Black Terrorists, and white-sounding voices coming in over the radio.

## **PLACE**

The setting will alternate between the Terrorist headquarters, a tenement apartment, and the home of Dr. Chauncey Radcliffe.

## **TIME**

The very near future, given the nature of American society.

# BLACK TERROR

## Scene 1

*Blood-red lights on a dark chamber. A number of young Black revolutionaries are gathered to perform a ceremony. Drums are playing. The women sing in eerie, high-pitched voices; the men make grunting and moaning sounds that blend in with the voices of the women. Bodies are swaying. Dancing. The smell of incense is in the air. A fire burns at an altar, Antar stands in front of the altar. The music, singing, and dances build to a frenzy until Antar bids silence. Ahmed, standing nearby, steps forward, raises clenched fist.*

AHMED. We are the Black Terrorists, sworn to the liberation of our people.

ALL. May we never lose sight of our duty.

AHMED. We seek the death of those who oppress us.

ALL. May our vengeance be as swift as lightning.

AHMED. We are the Black Terrorists, sworn to uphold the dignity of our African bloodline.

ALL. May we suffer death before disgrace to our ancestors.

AHMED. We live by the will of the Supreme Black Spirit to create a world of peace and beauty after the revolution.

ALL. May the blood of our oppressors never cease to flow until that world is realized.

AHMED. We are the Black Terrorists, sworn to die for the liberation of our people.

ALL. The oppressor of our people must die! We shall kill him where he works, we shall kill him as he sleeps, we shall kill him wherever he is. He must know of the wrath that befalls those who

consider themselves above the laws of God and humanity. His death will free our nation! His death will free the world! AAAAAA AAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!

*Drums. Wild dancing. Women dancing. Men shuffling in place. Shouting and screaming. Chants are heard. Silence as Antar raises his hands.*

ANTAR. Bring in the candidate.

*Two young Terrorists escort Keusi to the altar. Drum is heard softly in the background. Keusi kneels before Antar and altar.*

Ndugu Keusi Kifo, you kneel before me having been chosen by vote to carry out a mission of assassination against the most vicious and ruthless enemy of the people in this area. Your target is Police Commissioner Charles Savage, organizer of the mad-dog Night Rangers of the police department. He is an avowed enemy of the revolution and he is therefore an oppressor. He must die.

ALL. (*Chant.*)

Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka!  
Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka!  
Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka!

*M'Balía will come forward from the assembly and kneel at the altar before Keusi.*

(*Sing.*)

Spirits of our forefathers  
Come forth  
Reach into our hearts  
And remove the fear  
Reach into our minds  
And remove the doubt  
Release the anger in our souls  
And give us strength  
To do  
What must  
Be done.

(*Chant.*)

Sifa Ote Mtu Weusi

Sifa Ote Mtu Weusi  
Sifa Ote Mtu Weusi

ANTAR. Dada M’Balía, you kneel before me, having volunteered to team with Ndugu Keusi in the execution of this mission. Your past performances in action have proven you to be an outstanding revolutionary and an expert terrorist. Your knowledge and experience will prove to be the perfect complement to Ndugu Keusi’s own revolutionary talents.

*The others will sing the lines below as Antar is given a large knife by Ahmed. He places the knife in a fire on the altar to purify it. Antar holds the knife aloft. Drums grow louder, then subside. Antar takes Keusi’s arm and makes an incision, then does the same with M’Balía. Meanwhile, the others are singing.*

ALL. (*Sing.*)

Spirits of the Black Nation  
Come.  
Take hold of your servants  
Guide our lives  
Make us strong  
Place steel in the marrow of our bones  
Grant us inner peace  
To fulfill our terrible missions.

(*Chant.*)

Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka  
Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka  
Lasima Tuchinde Mbilishaka

ANTAR. Ndugu Keusi and Dada M’Balía, the two of you have been joined together by blood. Until this mission is complete or until I terminate this mission, you will guard each other with your lives.

*Ahmed steps forward with an array of weapons on a dark red pillow.*

You will assume secret identities and live within the community and await the opportune moment to carry out your orders.

*Hands weapons to Keusi.*

These are your weapons. You will use them well, my brother. What say you both?

KEUSI and M'BALIA. (*In an incantation.*) Spirit Guardians of the dark regions  
Hear my cry  
Let not my will falter  
Let not my desire fall  
With all my strength  
Let me defeat my enemy  
With all my soul  
Let me defeat my enemy  
Let me see to the will of  
The Black Nation  
Show me  
No mercy  
Should I fail my  
Sacred oath.

AHMED. (*Steps forward, raises clenched fist.*) We are the Black Terrorists, sworn to the liberation of our people.

ALL. May we never lose sight of our duty.

AHMED. We seek the death of those who oppress us.

ALL. May our vengeance be as swift as lightning. AAAAAAAAAA  
AAAIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!

*Drum, music, dancing as Keusi and M'Balialia exit. Lights go down.*

## Scene 2

*Lights up on a room in a tenement apartment. Very little furniture. Large rug on the floor. Keusi, M'Balialia, and Ahmed sit on large cushions.*

AHMED. All right, listen up. Ndugu Keusi, your target has a set pattern of behavior. He plays golf at the Golden Triangle every weekend from 11 A.M. to 5 P.M. He showers, then leaves the golf course promptly at 6:45 P.M. He always takes the parkway back to the city.

KEUSI. He travel alone?

AHMED. Always. Now, about twenty-five miles south of the city, the parkway has this big curve in it that goes through this valley. There are a lot of trees, high grass, and shrubbery. He usually hits that curve around 7:15. And he drives in the left lane.

KEUSI. What kinda car do he drive?

AHMED. (*Piqued.*) Man, didn't you study the briefing notes on the target?

KEUSI. Yeah, well, I don't remember seeing anything in it about the kinda car he got.

AHMED. It was in there, man. Dammit, man. Get yourself together. You blow this mission—

KEUSI. (*Annoyed.*) Just tell me what kinda car he drive. I don't need no lecture.

AHMED. You better watch your mouth, man. You still only an initiate. One word from me and your ass'll be crawling in the dirt.

KEUSI. I'm sorry, man. Nervous, I guess.

AHMED. Don't be sorry, just keep in mind your position when you talk to someone who got rank over you. Now, in view of the fact that you ain't studied, I gotta take time out to get up off a whole lotta insignificant information. The target drives a 1965 Buick LeSabre; four-door; blue. License plate number NPD-911.

*Keusi writes info down.*

KEUSI. Got it. Thanks, man.

AHMED. (*Ignoring him.*) It's important that you be on the right-hand slope of the valley at 7:15 to get the best shot at the target. The high grass will hide you. We figure once the oppressor is hit his car will veer out of control and crash. In the confusion, you can make a sure getaway. Be sure you can find the ejected shell and take it with you. We don't want no clues left behind, at all.

KEUSI. Aw, man, now how the hell am I gonna find an ejected shell in all that grass?

AHMED. Look, stop questioning your orders and do like you're told. All the FBI gotta do is find a shell, or some other seemingly insignificant shit, and the next thing you know they'll be banging on our door.

# BLACK TERROR

by Richard Wesley

8 men, 2 women (doubling, flexible casting)

In America's very near future, a guerilla revolution is in progress. A group of youths who call themselves the Black Terrorists has taken up arms against its oppressors. But Keusi, a Vietnam veteran and the group's most prized assassin, harbors counterrevolutionary thoughts. He doesn't believe that all the killing is necessary—he finds it hard to hate, and thinks the Black Terrorists are bravely but poorly led. When the terrorists decide to assassinate a black politician who has pledged to destroy the insurgency, Keusi has grave doubts. Should black men kill black men? When and how will the slaughter end?

*"...grim and gripping... The strains of personal and public loyalty running through the play, the discussions of revolutionary practice and ethics, the moral and dramatic tensions, all make BLACK TERROR a very rich and complex play. ... This is a remarkable and provocative play—the kind of political play that needs to be written and demands to be seen by black and white alike."*

—The New York Times

*"... Wesley gives both sides a chance to state their positions clearly and... it provides for some very crucial subjects to be aired."* —Jet

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AUTUMN  
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